

Implementing a New Online Service – Beckett Books Extra

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Abstract: This article discusses the implementation of the Beckett Books Extra service at Leeds Beckett University. After explaining what the service is, the article describes how the service was integrated into the existing workload of the Collections Maintenance Team with a focus on providing student requesters with the same high level of service provided to Academic Librarians. The balance between allowing students to make acquisition decisions and good collections management is discussed, whilst the benefits of using Google Forms as adaptive and collaborative methods of data collection are highlighted. The decision to communicate with students about their requests in order to improve customer service is explained as is the ways in which creating this service has led to cross-team working and external interest. Lastly, key figures on what types of resources have been requested and purchased as a result of the service are presented and discussed.

Background

Beckett Books Extra (BBE) is an online service offered by Leeds Beckett University Library. It allows students to request books, AV items and computer games which will benefit their studies or research. The aim is that the service will be accessible and easy for students to use, which provides an empowering experience with direct benefits to their studies. The service anticipates that students may want resources that are outside the scope of library subject funds, particularly if they are researching an unusual or highly specific subject area. It also recognises that students may not be able to afford to purchase such items. In this way BBE takes an enterprising and creative approach to supporting students which matches wider University values.

The service is for resources that are currently unavailable via the library which typically means resources that are not in stock at either campus library or as an e-resource. However there is also scope to purchase an extra copy of a resource which is already in stock, provided there is a clear need to improve availability. In line with wider collections management strategy, e-books are purchased as a first choice wherever possible.

The service was trialled during semester two, which runs from February to May, in the 2014/15

academic year. This enabled the team to gauge student interest in the service and understand how to administer the service effectively. For the 2015/16 academic year the service opened in early October 2015. This article will discuss requests received since the start of the trial period up until the end of April 2016.

Managing the Service

The BBE service is run by the Collections Maintenance Team who are responsible for book acquisition and all tasks related to the life cycle of book and e-book resources at Leeds Beckett University and the team is split across two campuses, one in Headingley and one in the city centre. Integrating BBE into the existing workload of the Collections Maintenance team required an openness to providing a service with students as direct customers. Existing acquisition methods whereby Academic Librarians liaise with faculty staff ensures resources are chosen for their quality and relevance to the course curriculum. Allowing students to directly choose resources empowers them to make these choices of quality and relevance, but Collections Maintenance staff utilise written procedures and can query requests with managers or Academic Librarians if they are in doubt about the appropriateness or value of an

item. For instance, no popular fiction will be ordered unless it is directly relevant to the student's course. It is possible for fiction to be relevant given that courses in literature and creative writing are taught at the University, so staff must check the course the student is registered on, use procedures and their own judgement to make these ordering decisions. This balance between student choice and collections management is an important consideration when implementing this type of patron driven service but an organisation can specify and adapt criteria as necessary.

The BBE service fits well with established skills and responsibilities of the team, but there was a risk that adding to their workload would have a negative impact on other tasks. Furthermore, there was uncertainty over the distribution of requests by campus. If significantly more requests were received for one campus than the other this may impact on that team's ability to fulfil other duties. During the trial period 58% of requests were for students based at the City campus. Of the 39 items actually purchased, 25 (64%) were for City campus. This suggested that there would be significant differences between campuses when the service was launched for the 2015/16 academic year. Therefore the impact of the new service on the capacity and workload of the Collections Maintenance teams was an important consideration and monitored with interest.

New resources for the library are generally requested by Academic Librarians emailing the Collections Maintenance team shared inbox and this is treated as a priority task. Since starting BBE, the requests received from students have also been treated as a priority. The vast majority of requests received on a weekday have been processed on the same day, whilst requests submitted over the weekend have been processed by early the following week. In this way the team has treated students' requests in the same spirit as traditional orders from Librarians and have worked hard to provide excellent customer service. In considering a new service which constitutes a priority task however, it is important to identify which other tasks may need to be deprioritised and whether the team has the capacity to manage this change.

Incorporating this service has required flexibility from the team and good

communication, through both dialogue between team members and procedural documents. The relative ease with which BBE has been adopted by the team is testament to the commitment shown by staff to make it a success. It also suggests that with staff buy-in, such initiatives are an excellent way of providing a service of direct benefit to students which in turn raises the profile of the library service to faculties and external library professionals.

Submitting and Administering Requests

Students submit requests by logging on to the student portal MyBeckett, going to the Library section of the site and then filling in an online form under the Beckett Books Extra button. As MyBeckett is the main way that our students access library information, this is an ideal place for the form to be located. An email is then automatically sent to both the City and Headingley Collections Maintenance team inboxes to alert them to a new request. Staff check the spreadsheet and place orders for the campus at which they work. Developed by the Learning Systems team, the service uses Google Forms as the customer interface which has been tailored to match the University's branding, fitting seamlessly with the other services available through MyBeckett and create a paperless service which is efficient and accessible.

For staff administering the service, a Google Sheet captures submitted requests and provides a secure method of storing information which can be accessed simultaneously by multiple staff both on and off campus. The spreadsheet is automatically populated with the student's name, email address and course information as recorded on the University student administration system BANNER, providing increased quality control of this information. However this also means the data has to be protected and the sheet can only be accessed by staff who know both the email address and the password for the service. A simple way in which the spreadsheet aids administration is via conditional formatting to differentiate orders by location.

There is also the benefit that the form can be quickly and easily edited by Collections Maintenance staff to better suit the information needs of our customers. Some of the wording was changed during the trial as a result of some

students placing multiple requests on a single form which was difficult to read and administer on the spreadsheet. This meant that the co-ordinator had to split them up into individual requests to ensure that each was recorded and ordered correctly. Changing the wording reduced the instances of this happening and demonstrates the importance of clear instructions. Subsequently the instructions was edited again after it was found that a couple of staff members had submitted requests. The wording was changed to specifically address students and make it clear that the service is not for academic or support staff. Since this change no more requests have been received from staff.

These applications have proved highly effective for administering BBE and are now also being considered for capturing orders from Academic Librarians, an example of where support from the Learning Systems team has produced innovative results and made the process easier for both students and staff. A key lesson from this part of the process has been the need to make instructions absolutely clear but also use applications which can be quickly altered to respond to the information needs of customers.

Communicating with Requesters

The decision of how and when to communicate with student requesters has evolved and the trial period was instrumental in decision-making. Whilst this can be a time consuming aspect of BBE, it delivers good customer service and provides the co-ordinator with a thorough overview of what is being purchased and facilitates management reporting.

Initially it was felt that responding individually to each request may be too time-consuming and a list of purchased items could be provided on the Library website instead. During the trial period however, it was decided that this was not ideal from a customer service point of view because students would need to repeatedly check the website. Consequently a member of the Collections Maintenance team was asked to respond to each request by email, advising whether or not the requested item was going to be purchased. A standard timeframe of when their item would be available was also provided: 2–6 weeks for physical items and 1 week for e-books. From the student's point of view this removed any

uncertainty and gave them an idea of when the item would be available and in what format.

There were concerns that the timeframe for the delivery of physical items would be disappointing for students used to purchasing from online companies with fast delivery. However, there have been no complaints about this although we have received a small number of email queries where orders have not been fulfilled within 6 weeks. It may be that students do not feel able to complain because they are not directly paying for the service and therefore do not feel like 'customers'. It would be interesting to ask their opinion on this topic to inform whether they feel we are delivering good customer service through BBE.

A disadvantage of the current service is that students are unable to place a hold (reservation) on an item at the point of request, which other universities are able to provide. This is because the library management system at Leeds Beckett University can only accept holds after the item has been catalogued. Again, we have been surprised how few requesters have raised this as an issue. However, for the next academic year, the Collections Maintenance team will place the holds on behalf of requesters when items arrive from suppliers. This service development should increase usage and provide better customer service.

Confirmation emails are sent manually which can be a relatively time-consuming process. However the staff role developed from just sending emails into fully co-ordinating the service, overseeing the day to day administration, collating queries related to the service, reporting results to managers and Academic Librarians and sharing information with frontline staff. Therefore it has been useful to retain ownership over the majority of email responses as it provides detailed knowledge of what has been requested, by whom and the outcome.

Alternatively it would be straightforward to share this task and it has necessarily been delegated when the co-ordinator has been on leave by using standardised email signatures as template responses. In this way, the Collections Maintenance team have developed a standardised method of communicating with students which facilitates the general administration and

reporting of the service, whilst promoting good customer service.

Raising the Library's Profile

One of the key benefits of the BBE service is that it has facilitated discussions with colleagues from across the library, University and also externally. In this way it has raised the profile of the Library and demonstrated the value the Library provides.

It has been necessary and beneficial to work with other library teams to check if the inter-library loan (ILL) or holds teams can provide a resource where BBE cannot because it does not match the service's criteria. Where students have asked for journal articles for example, Collections Maintenance staff check the EBSCO Discovery Service to establish if it is already available through our journal subscriptions and where it is not, students are emailed to suggest they request it through the ILL service. Discussions have taken place with these teams to make them aware that this may happen and conversely that the BBE service may be able to help their students. If a student requires an item for longer than the ILL service can provide, for instance, they may want to request we purchase a copy through BBE. In this way, creating a new student service provides opportunities for different teams to work together, learn more about each other's roles and ensure the library is working dynamically and cohesively. Doing so raises the profile of each team's work within the library service although BBE has also been able to raise the profile of the library beyond the department.

Vicky Rhodes, a Library Assistant from Greenhead College in Huddersfield, had heard about the service via a member of the Holds team at Leeds Beckett University illustrating a further benefit of internal communication and cross-team cohesion as information then radiates out across people's networks. Ms. Rhodes asked to visit the library service and find out more, so the co-ordinator delivered a presentation on the service and outcomes to date. She was interested in implementing the service in her own workplace which was an excellent endorsement for BBE. This suggests that external library professionals see the value of the service and can see how it would work on a practical basis in their own organisations.

Resources Acquired Through BBE

Given that there has been no marketing of the service, the number of resources requested has surpassed expectation. However the range of requests by subject area and number of e-books ordered has been lower than expected.

From 2 October 2015 – 30 April 2016 there was a total of 286 requests of which 209 met the criteria and were ordered. Whilst this equates to 1.7 requests per successful requester and suggests students value the service enough to use it multiple times, a small number of students have requested a large numbers of items. Therefore the median provides a better indication of data distribution (Table 1).

Table 1.

| Requests per Student Requester | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Mean | 1.7 |
| Median | 1 |
| Mode | 33 |

Figure 1 shows the number of resources ordered by type and reveals that 79% of books ordered had to be ordered in print, as no e-book version was available. The majority of requests have come from students studying cultural or humanity subjects and these resources are less likely to be available as e-books which explains why we have purchased more print items than predicted (Figure 2). 75% of requests have also come from students based at City Campus so, as seen during the trial period, Collections Maintenance staff at City Campus have done the majority of the ordering for this service (Figure 3).

In June 2016, usage figures for BBE print and e-books were collected. These figures were surprisingly low, with only 44% of print items being issued (Figure 4.0), although e-books fared better with 61% accessed at least once (Figure 4.1). This is likely to improve when the new Holds scheme is implemented.

Conclusion

Beckett Books Extra is an online service which allows students to request resources for their studies and research. It has resulted in 209 new resources being available within the library.

There have been challenges to address regarding how to communicate instructions and

outcomes to students, but having a short trial demonstrated the need for clear communication and enabled staff to refine wording.

Some of the issues which were predicted, such as student expectations of delivery timeframes have not materialised but the prediction that a small number of students would use the service extensively did occur. Whilst this is a positive in terms of demonstrating the value of the service to students, it also suggests that if BBE was marketed within the University, many other students would find the service beneficial.

Implementing BBE has required help and support from other teams across the library, such as Learning Systems, Inter-library Loans and the Holds teams which has facilitated closer working relationships. A clear benefit of discussing new services both internally and externally is that it demonstrates the value and innovation offered by the University. It would be useful to understand how requesters found the service, what they thought about the process and how they have benefitted from resources purchased as this would enable us to improve the service for the future. As the service matures, it is hoped that more students will discover and use it which in turn will provide interesting new resources for the libraries which will be of benefit to all students.

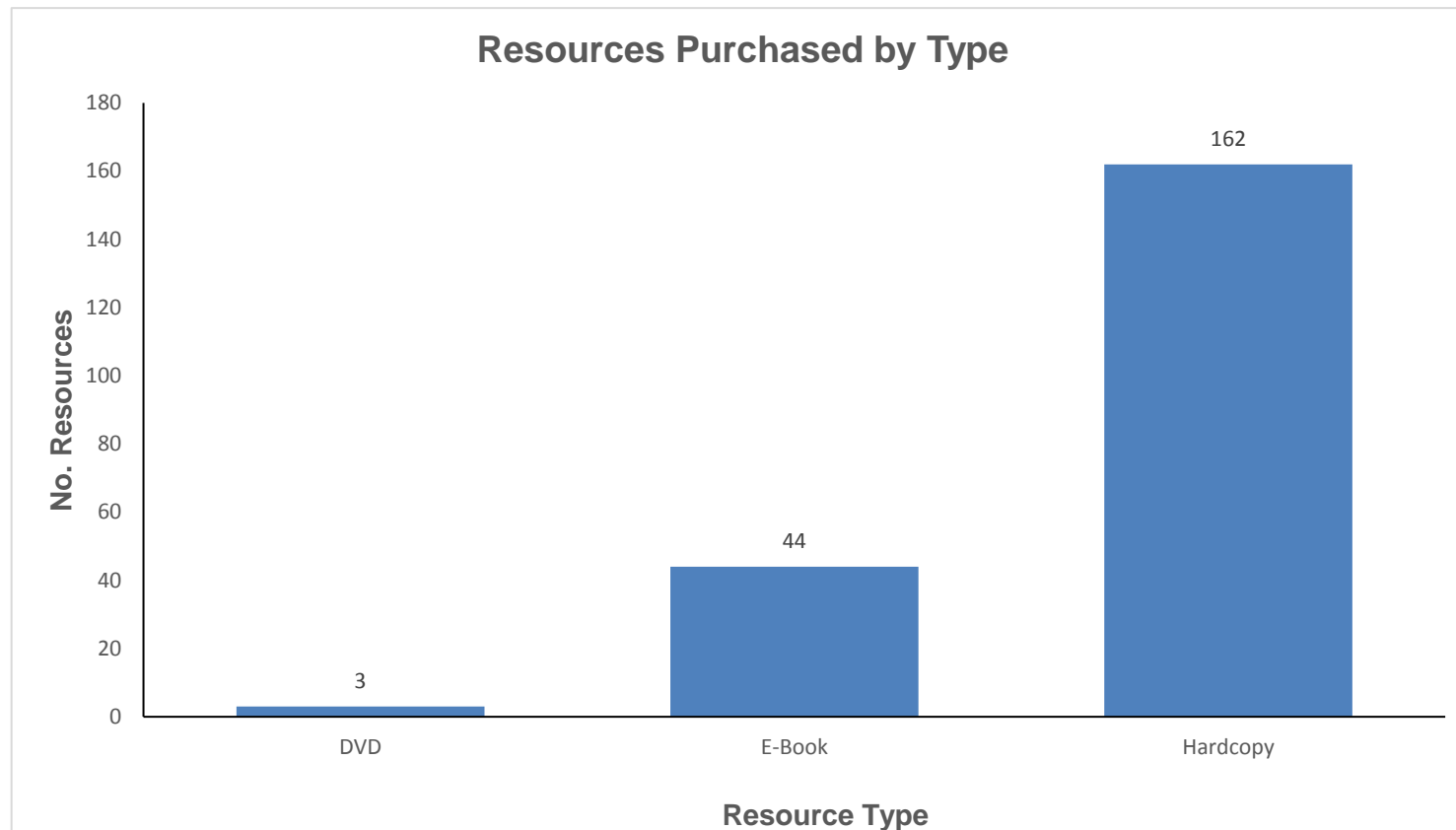


Figure 1. No. of Resources Purchased by Type

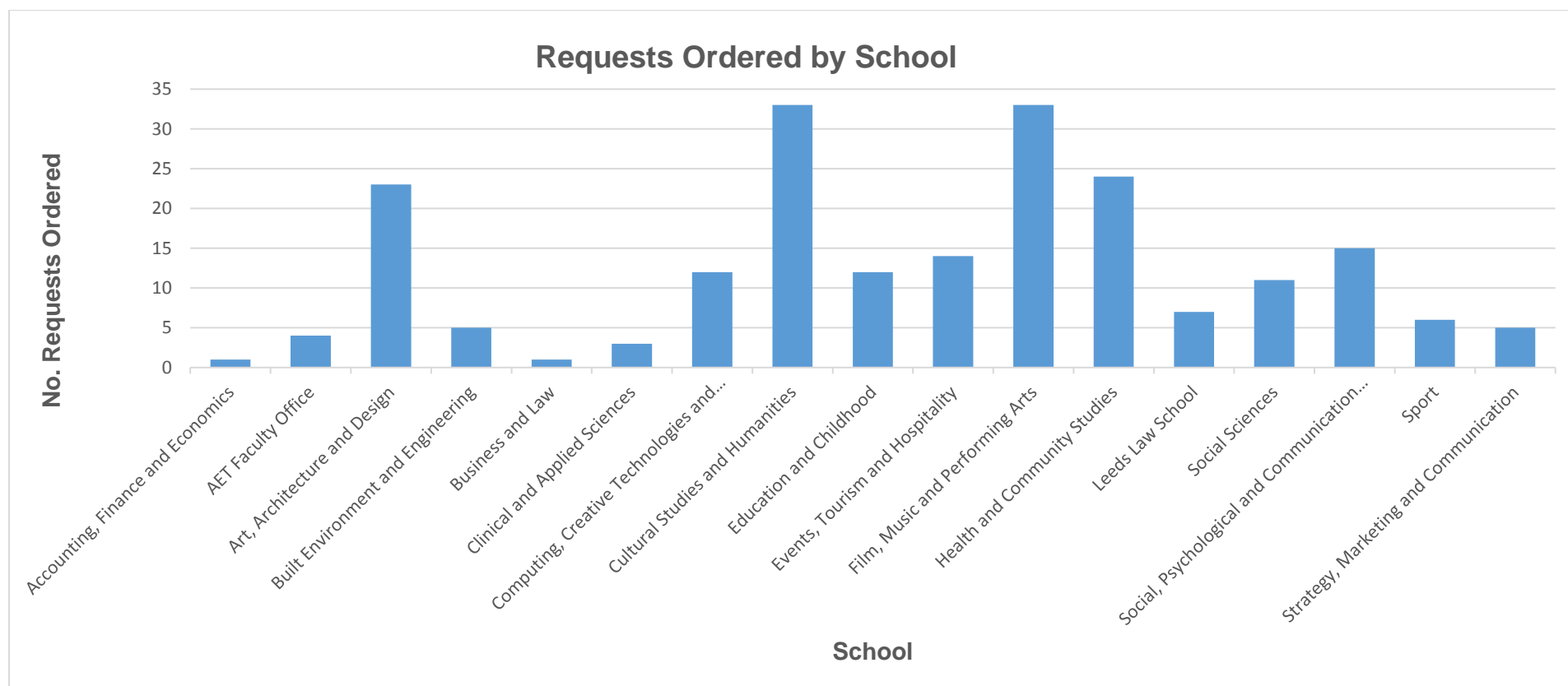


Figure 2. No. Requests Ordered by School

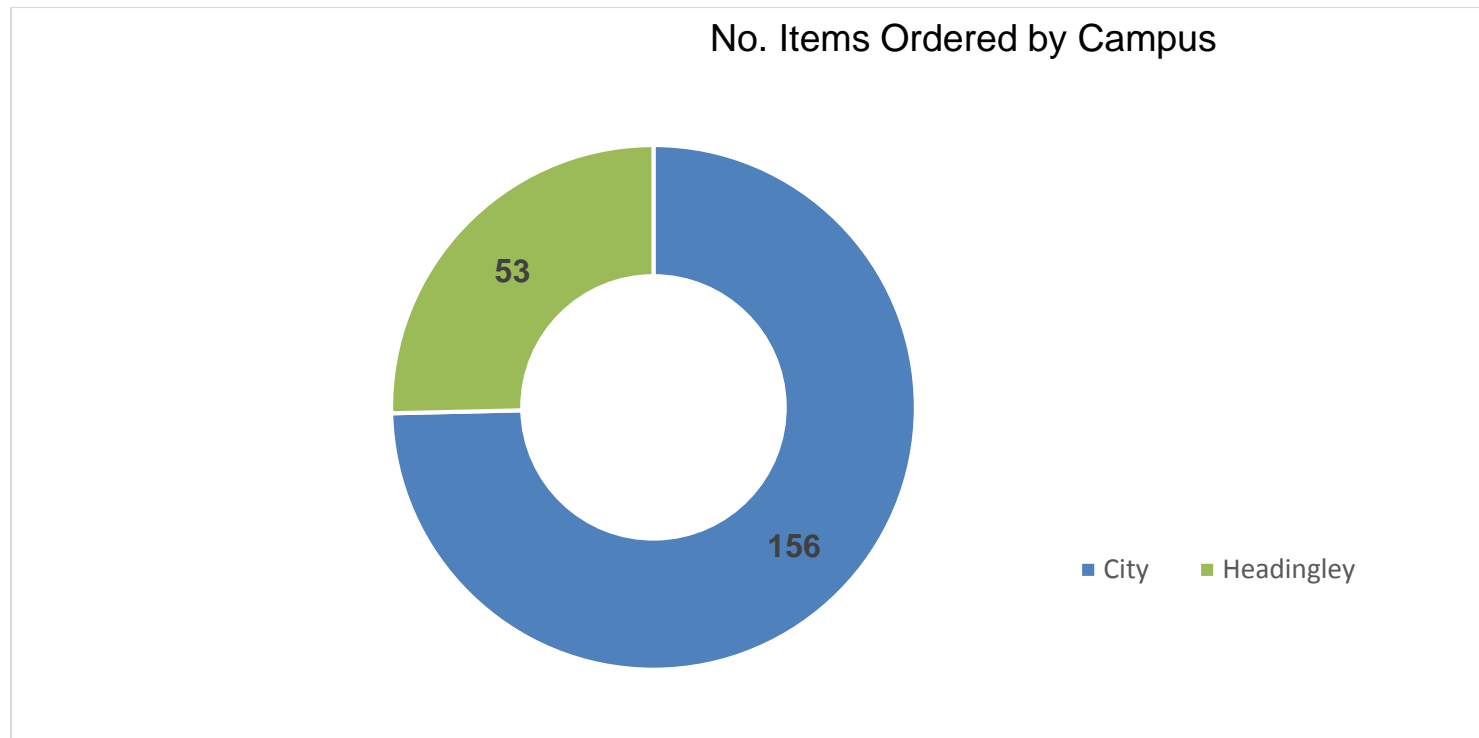


Figure 3. No. items ordered by campus

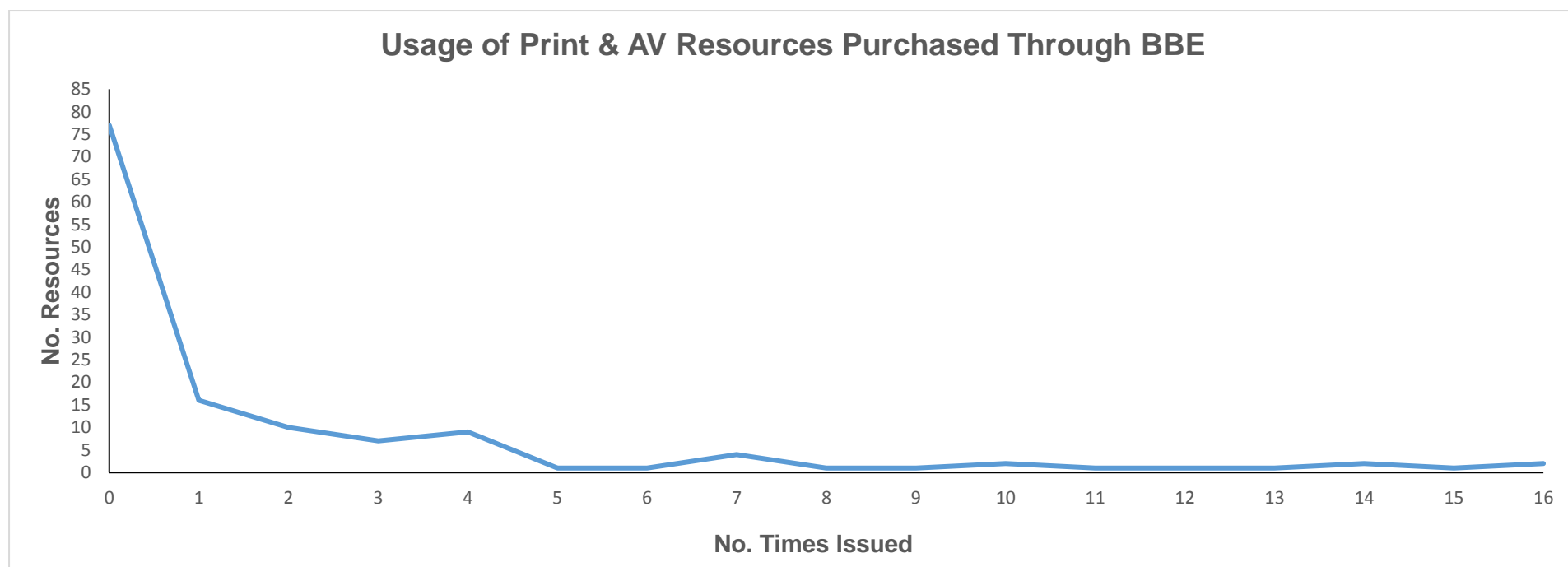


Figure 4.o. Usage of print and AV resources purchased through Beckett Books Extra

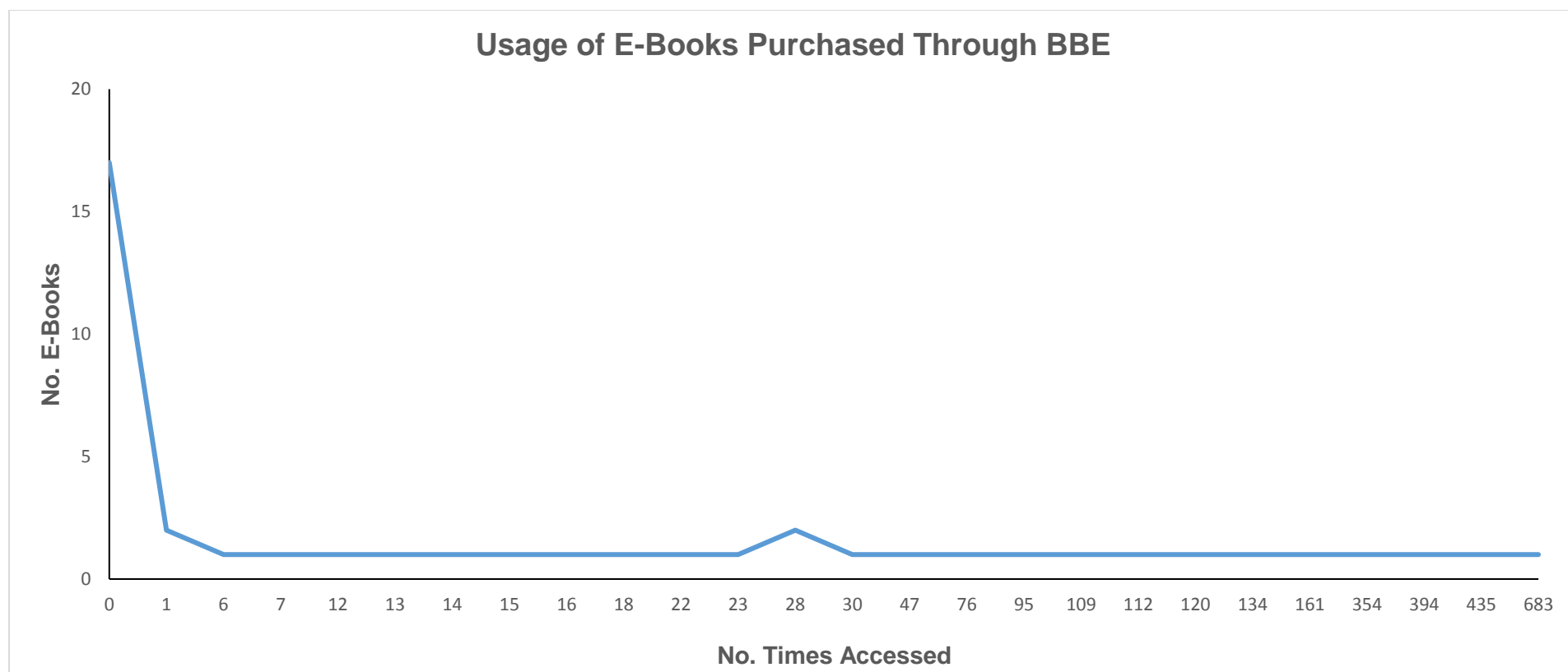


Figure 4.1. Usage of E-Books purchased through Beckett Books Extra